In 1947 the first diesels appeared at Skykomish running the fast mail and passenger trains. By 1952 the entire Cascade Division had converted to diesel engines. There were no scheduled steam trains after March of 1953. Skykomish was still an important town for Great Northern as it was a staging area.
where diesels were hooked up to electric engines to pull the large freight trains through the tunnel and between Skykomish and Wenatchee. On July 31, 1956 diesels took over the complete operation when the ventilation system was completed (see details on last page of History of Skykomish Part 1). Soon after that event the overhead electric lines were taken down, the electric engines sold, and the power plant equipment was dismantled and sold. The importance of Skykomish for Great Northern Railway was reduced to just a place to add helper engines for the steep grade through the tunnel and refueling if needed. In 1950 the population was 497 people. By 1960 that number dropped 26 % to 366. It dropped about 25% each decade and stabilized at 200 residents by 1990.

With a downsizing of railroad operations at Skykomish the town saw a huge drop in workers as they no longer needed crews to man and maintain the electrics, or operate the transformer station. The railroad kept about 30 workers stationed in Skykomish to switch in and out helpers and work with the maintenance and operation of the engines. In addition there were frequently work gangs for the line.

Logging was still a factor in the area, employing people for work in the woods, but it was in decline also. The Bloedel Donovan mill was sold in the 1940's to another company, and it closed completely in 1958. The old growth was mostly logged out and the timber industry was just a small time operation compared to what it once was.

The cement plant that opened at Grotto in 1925, about 4 miles south of Skykomish, had its biggest customer as Great Northern supplying cement to build the new Cascade tunnel. As the years went by the transportation costs made the plant less cost effective. It was sold and moved to Seattle in 1959, another decline in local employment and need for services.

Changes were afoot for the railroad as well. Passenger cars had replaced the train as the transportation choice for the masses. The last scheduled passenger train to stop in Skykomish was May 1971. Great Northern Railway, and several other railroads, were merged in 1970 to become Burlington Northern. Then Burlington Northern combined with Santa Fe Railway in 1996 to make the current Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railways (BNSF).

By late 1960's the railroad was relying less on adding helpers and refueling at Skykomish as the helpers were add at Seattle or the origin of the consist. By 1973 the railroad eliminated the helper crews at Skykomish, adding another downside to the Skykomish population.

In the 1960's skiing at Steven Pass became more popular. Many skiers stayed the weekend at Skykomish and some bought land and built homes there. Throughout the 1970's the hotel with it's food, bars, dance hall and hotel rooms were still popular with the revelers, skiers, hikers, and others enough to keep it running. The hotel changed hands several times but kept on going. In 1980 the hotel again changed hands. During the next 10 years some renovation was done to verandas, the kitchen, and dining room. It changed hands again in 1989 but occupancy was waning and was closed in the mid -1990's for good.
The Agony of Seeping Oil

In the late 1990's people became more concerned with soil contamination, and seepage of oil into the river was rising alarms in some circles. Decades of legal, but questionable, steam and diesel re-fueling and disposal practices by Great Northern Railroad left the soil heavily contaminated. Over time the oil soaked down through the soil and when it hit bedrock it formed underground pools. Eventually the oil seeped into the Skykomish River. Old timers say an oily sheen was common below the town even in the 40's, but it was not a rallying point until the year 2000. In 1999 the Skykomish High school's video class was looking for a project and chose to document the oil under the town. The final result, a short video called An Oily Sky, was completed in 2000. The video focused considerable attention on the oil beneath the town and is recognized as a catalyst in what has followed. After years of meetings and discussions, in 2005 agreements were reached between Washington State Department of Ecology, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, and Skykomish as to how the cleanup would proceed. The cleanup project began in 2006 and was mostly completed by 2011. In an ironic twist of fate the soil under the school has yet to be cleaned up. Methods are still under consideration for decontaminating the soil, even though the school is outside of the major oil plume (see oil plume map next page).

The oil contamination originated by refueling on a siding. There was a sump tank which was located about 200 feet from the east end of the current depot's location. The sump tank was a large underground reservoir to hold the oil. In the sump were coils where steam was passed through to heat the oil. When the oil was warm it was pumped into an elevated tank, which then provided gravity feed to fuel the engines. The sump tank leaked and frequently overflowed when oil expanded as it was heated. The original tank was made out of wood, and the second one was poured concrete, which promptly cracked, therefore, both leaked. Even the metal one used in later days had problems when it overflowed because it was too full. These factors, along with other poor fueling and disposal practices, lead to a oil plume that spreads in a NW direction under the town and towards the river. In 2005 dozens of wells were drilled in town and the surrounding area to determine the extent of the problem, as shown below.

Drilling in center of Town

Drilling at School

It was found the oil existed mainly under the town. See photo below for the oil plume map.
The area where the current Depot Park is located was pretty much oil free except for the contaminated soil where the sump was located.

Once the oil plume was determined, and the homes and buildings with oil under them were identified, a series of meetings were held between BNSF and the landowners. For buildings that were occupied a local rental was usually available to move the residents into temporarily. The moving and excavation were done in stages so the whole town was not disrupted at the same time.

Then buildings were jacked up and moved temporarily to a new location so the soil could be excavated, as shown with a house below.
Near the river the levy was moved outward, oil proofed, and reinforced to provide more working room to excavate contaminated soils and pump out the collected oil. See photo below.

The contaminated soil in some places was 30 feet deep, and once excavated it was shipped to a decontamination site in Oregon for disposal. Over 350,000 tons of contaminated soil was removed. In the photo below you can see the contaminated dirt being excavated. This scene is about where the three story hotel stood, as seen parked in background. Once the pit was below the water table the oil seeped out of the ground and spread on top of the water. Fire hoses were used to concentrate the oil in a part of the pit, and then a vacuum hose sucked it into a tanker truck as seen on back side of this pond.
Excavation and Oil Collection Downtown

The oil was hauled away to another part of town where it was run through an oil/water separator as shown in picture below.

Oil and Water Separator

The oil was then loaded into a tanker truck and sent to Seattle where it was re-sold as fuel oil to the maritime industry. The volume of oil extracted was as about 218,000 gallons, and 20 million gallons waste water was treated. The original estimate was 2 million gallons of oil under the town.

BNSF could not afford to take the main east - west railroad line out of service for weeks to excavate and remove contaminated soil, so therefore drove sheet piling in a strip about 1200 feet long between the tracks and the town to isolate the area as shown in shown below. This photo is taken showing the...
center of town with the Whistling Post as the building in the upper right corner of picture. A bulldozer is in the process of filling the hole in with crushed rock. A scene repeated for all the excavated sites.

Sheet Piling Between RR Tracks and Railroad Avenue

2014 Photo Showing Same View as Sheet Piling Photo Above

With the roads and utilities dug up they had to be reconstructed, literally block by block. However, since most of the one hundred year old buildings in the main part of town are designated historic sites,
the buildings would have to be preserved, moved, and stored during reclamation. The law would not allow their demolition, even if they were on the verge of collapsing. Over the next four years, the oil soaked soil was excavated, loaded into sealed gondola cars, transported to a special decontaminating facility in Oregon where it was disposed of. Some 260,000 cubic yards of soil was excavated and shipped to Oregon and replaced with crushed rock before the project was done. (That is about 24,000 dump truck loads). The town was then rebuilt over this cleaned fill. New streets, sewers with waste water treatment system, new water mains, sidewalks, electrical service, and building foundations were built, all to present-day building standards. Most buildings, historic and otherwise, were then returned to their original locations, and placed on their new foundations. One of the big features was building a waste water treatment system where all the buildings were connected to it.

Up until the late 1940's Maloney creek meandered through the land that is now Deport park. The creek was moved to the south side of the road to reduce flooding problems for the railroad. The resultant landscape was depressions for old stream beds and lots of willow, alder, and cottonwood. To make this land useful as a park, as a win-win project, Maloney Creek was dredged in 2010 for better fish habitat and flood control. The spoils were used to fill the former Maloney Creek Wetlands site to be more in step with the Town Vision Statement.

Below is a picture taken circa 1934 and one taken in 2014. The perspective of the pictures are different as the water tower from which the first one was taken is no longer present. Note that the hotel labeled Cascadia is really the Hatley Hotel. When a fire burned the top floor in 1937 it was extensively remodeled and renamed the Cascadia.
The concept of building a Town Center Park and putting a model railroad to draw visitors to the area originated with then Mayor Fred Black. Kevin Weiderstrom took this concept and expanded on it and the Great Northern and Cascade Railway was born. He was the driving force behind getting approval by the City Council and BNSF for the attraction of the Town Center Park to be a 1/8 scale model railroad. The main line of reasoning was that Skykomish was a railroad town, so its historic theme could be used to attract people to town with a model railroad. There was little competition as only one other public track exists in Washington. The town council hoped that this might be their best chance to draw people into town where they would spend their money at local businesses.

Skykomish is about an hour’s drive from the north metropolitan centers of the Puget Sound area, and a great place to take a family for a day’s outing. In addition, there are thousands of people passing by Skykomish on their way to and from Eastern Washington. With proper signage and advertising some of these people could be detoured for a train ride and purchases in town. The money spent by these crowds for food, lodging, and entertainment would go a long way to re-vitalize the area economy. In addition it appeared that BNSF, if presented a reasonable plan, would help with the start-up funding.

BNSF leased to the town 3 acres of land which is now the Town Center Park. As a corner stone for the park the town requested ownership of the original 1898 depot, and to have it moved to the park. The original Train Station location was approximately 75 feet North of where it sits today.

An artist was retained to generate a perspective drawing of the proposed development that also incorporated restoration of the original Depot, parking, and full scale engines for a point of interest. The drawing proved to be sufficient to demonstrate the feasibility of the project to both the railroad and local citizenry, and in March of 2011 the Town Council voted to approve the project. The railroad the Town chose to build, as part of the Town Center, was a 7 ½” gauge loop of track encircling the property and the historic train station. Building on the models of other public tracks, free rides would be available on weekends, with donations accepted to provide funds for maintenance and expansion of the new railway.
Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railways agreed with the Towns plan and gave them a grant to finance the building of what is called the Skykomish Town Center project. It was their corporate generosity to give back something to Skykomish. BNSF owned the 3 acres adjacent to the railroad tracks and was willing to commit to a 50 year lease to the town.

In May of 2011 work got underway with grading of the current Town Center. It was an uneven dirt surface with a scattering of native brush. The area was graded flat, catch basins and underground drain lines were laid, and the area covered with crushed rock. Then the Depot was moved in place in August of 2012. This area was the original spot for the transformer station that converted the electricity to the correct voltage and frequency to power the electric engines that ran from Skykomish to Wenatchee. The concrete mass to south of the Depot, and the concrete slabs with rails in them, are remnants of the building. With the area ready to build on plans were drawn up to lay out the track and order materials.

As the General Manager for the Town Center Kevin was responsible to get all the various pieces of the project moving in the right direction. For the railroad he decided to use scale aluminum rail and plastic ties. All of the labor from drawing up the track plans, building track panels, switches, building the track grade and other labor was donated by volunteers. A rough estimate is that it takes 8 hours of labor to build and install one foot of track. By the time the 2700 feet of track were laid an estimated 22,000 person hours of labor was consumed.

The first step was to construct the 10 foot track panels, both curved and straight, and this was done in the Masonic Lodge by volunteers, including help from a number of high school students. The first track panel was laid down in August of 2012. Work was on the weekends or after work, and it was mostly and effort of 2 to 5 individuals at the start. Six weeks later the depot had been moved in place and 600 feet of track had been laid. In addition a cement sidewalk had been poured on the backside of the depot, two cement RR crossings constructed, timber bridge built, and a 40 foot long culvert was in place to serve as a tunnel. Quite an accomplishment for the volunteers! Below is a picture taken in September 2012. At this time the depot was in rough condition, and there was no landscaping. The cement in lower right corner of picture are remnants of the circa 1920 - 1955 power station.

A Humble Beginning September 2012
For Great Northern Days in September 2012 one individual brought his steam engine. With no unloading area ingenuity prevailed and the engine and cars were unloaded directly on the track. Immediately problems arose as the cement in the crossings were about a quarter inch above the rails. The brake rigging had to be taken off the riding cars to create enough clearance to operate. The second problem was the available air compressor used to provide initial draft to get the steam engine started was unable to provide enough air volume. So Skykomish Fire Department to the rescue! They brought a pumper over and provided air for the 30 minutes it took to get steam up enough for the internal blower to take over.

An Assist from Skykomish Fire Department to Start Steam Engine

It was a short ride for the passengers from the Depot over the bridge and through the tunnel up to the cement crossing next to current steaming bays. Then the steam engine would be put in reverse and everyone would ride backwards to the Depot to complete trip. There was a constant stream of riders until we shut it down about 6 hours later. It was evident that we may be on the right track here. The public was certainly enthusiastic.

For the club engine they wanted to retain the look of the steam engine era. But operation and maintenance of a live steamer takes considerable expertise and maintenance, so was not a good option for beginners without a machine shop. To retain the steamer look, without the problems of live steam, they chose a battery powered steam engine, complete with a sound system as shown in picture below.
About this same time plans were drawn up to build 10 six foot long straddle cars to haul the public. The assembly line for this project was in the High School basement. Work was done during the cold wet winter. Besides the club electric steam engine, members and guests brought their gas powered and live steam powered engines to run on the track and help haul passengers as shown in picture below.

When the outside construction season started up again in March the website and it's link to Facebook, proved to be quite valuable. This effort tripled the number of volunteers and track progress progressed more rapidly. The goal was to be finished by May 4, 2013 for the grand opening.

The first step in track construction was to build 2x4 forms and then dump 1 ½ inch clean gravel to fill up forms, then level the gravel to form the base. This was heavy work and many hands definitely helped here. Once the base grade was in place, the forms were removed and track panels were laid, connected, ballasted, and leveled. The work conditions were not always pleasant, but the volunteers showed up and worked whether it was sunny, raining or snowing.
During track construction, work was also being done on the depot. A grant had been secured to restore the depot to near original condition. The first effort was to reconstruct the end where the “new” addition had been removed, and renovating the inside to make it usable, including installing flooring over the big hole in the floor where it had rotted out. In addition, a grant was obtained for landscaping. A landscaper volunteered his time for this project. He directed efforts to place dirt and large boulders that were hauled in to provide some landscaping material for plants, which gives quite a relief from all the gravel. By the end of April everything was in place for the Grand Opening. Below are two pictures showing some of the progress.

On the first day of the official opening there were approximately 1500 people. Throughout the first summer there was an average of 350 riders per weekend, almost all from out of town. The club engine was available, as well as one to four private engines. Just what member brought engines varied week
to week. Even though the track was laid and operational, constant track work was needed to fix dips, adjust for track movement, and keep the switches operational.

By end of October 2013 about 80 percent of the depot had been renovated inside, except for painting, and the outside had been painted. Another landscape feature was put in at east end of the depot in October. After the winter thaw of 2014, and before the opening day in May, four steaming bays were added. A steaming bay is an elevated section of track made with channel iron that will allow waist high loading and unloading of engines and a place to service and steam up a live steam engine. This was be a big improvement over steaming up an engine on your knees.

Steaming Bay with 3 Visiting Steam Engines October 2014

The addition of the steaming bays enticed more individuals with steam engines to bring their engines to the track. Every one loves steam engines so this in turn adds to the allure of the track. During the second year of operation about 500 people took rides per weekend. These people provided added business to the town as well.

Planned 2015 Work

In October 2014 a pole shelter was moved into place in front of the depot. This is large enough to hold several picnic tables and will provide a place for waiting riders to get out of the sun or rain, and a place to eat a snack. To make it more comfortable when the wind blows a short wall will be erected on the east end. See picture below.
A month latter two pole shelters were moved in place in the south east corner of the park. During 2015 these shelters will be joined together to form a 15 x 40 foot train storage barn. A switch yard will be constructed and multiple tracks will be laid inside to store at 200 feet of engines and cars. This is a huge increase from the 55 feet now available under the depot.

Also, in 2014 the tunnel portal on the west end was constructed. This portal is modeled after the portal on the new Cascade Tunnel. The portal on the east end is under construction and will be modeled after the portal of the old Cascade Tunnel at Wellington. After the portals are completed the tunnel will be covered with dirt and landscaped as funds allow. Another project started in 2014 but will finish before opening day of 2015 is a reversing track. This is a short track that connects the mainline is such a manner that the direction of the trains run can be reversed. It also provides an alternate way to run for the passengers.

Below is an aerial photo showing the track and buildings on Town Center Park as of 2/2105.
To keep hauling passengers straddle cars are needed. The original cars built two years ago are rotting, and literally falling apart. More appropriate materials and construction practices are being used with the new cars, and hopefully 10 new straddle cars will be on the track before opening day 2015. With the completion of the switch yard and train shed the cars can be stored under cover and should last decades.

In 2015 a major project is to paint the Great Northern SD 9 engine in the original colors and move it to a display position in front of the depot.

Donations collected are used to rent the area from the town, pay utilities, pay for use of the town railroad engine but materials for track expansion, train shed, straddle Cars, new electrical service, portal construction, and other miscellaneous costs of running a railroad. As more donations come in, more track will be laid, the tunnel will be landscaped. Eventually there will be a second loop around the depot and outside of the current track, but this will take another $20,000 just for materials. We are a tax exempt organization, so large donations are welcome. A train storage building is planned for town engines, club engines, and those wishing to store their engines on site, whether overnight, or for a longer period. When money is available a small shop to work on engines will be built behind the train storage sheds.

Picnic areas and landscaping will be added as the Town obtains additional funds for development and maintenance.

Happy rails to you!

Many thanks to Bob Kelly of the Skykomish Historical Society for reviewing document and providing pictures to illustrate the text.